# READING LITERACY AT JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL IN ZIMBABWE

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## CHAPTER 1

# Background to the Study

Zimbabwe completed a reading literacy research study at the Junior Secondary School Certificate (JC) level in December, 1992. This study was coordinated and partly sponsored by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). Thirty other countries took part in the same research study at the same grade levels.

### WHAT IS IEA?

IEA is a non-profit-making association incorporated in Belgium for the purposes of doing the following:

— undertaking educational research on an international scale;
— promoting research aimed at examining educational problems in order to provide facts that can help in the ultimate improvement of educational systems;
— providing the means whereby research centres in the various participating countries can undertake co-operative research projects.

Between late 1988 and 1992, the IEA coordinated and sponsored the Reading Literacy Research Study which was undertaken by 31 countries. The study's coordinating center was at the University of Hamburg, Germany. Zimbabwe was one of these 31 countries which agreed to participate in the reading literacy research study with the University of Zimbabwe's Curriculum and Arts Department in the Faculty of Education hosting the project. The other countries were: Belgium, Botswana, Canada (British Columbia), Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany (two school systems, the East German system and the West German system), Greece, Hong Kong, Hungary, Iceland, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Philippines, Portugal, Singapore, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Trinidad and Tobago, United States of America, and Venezuela.

## HOW ZIMBABWE JOINED THE IEA READING LITERACY STUDY

Zimbabwe joined the IEA Study in March, 1989. The project's International Steering Committee wrote a letter to the University of Zimbabwe's Administration inviting their institution to join in the research that was going to be undertaken worldwide. The members of the International Steering Committee were: Albert E. Beaton (USA), Warwick B. Elley, Chairman (New Zealand), John Guthrie (USA), Ingvar Lundberg (Sweden) and Francis Mangubai (Australia).

The University Administration sent that letter of invitation to the Faculty of Education which in turn sent it to the then Curriculum Studies Department (the Curriculum Studies Department was dissolved at the end of 1989 and several departments resulted from it, one of which became the Department of Curriculum and Arts Education (CAE). The letter ended up in the CAE English teaching unit whose staff at the time were Professor Micere G. Mugo and the author of this book.

### The IEA Zimbabwe National Committee

The author, a Senior Lecturer, became the project's National Research Coordinator (NRC) and was the chief person responsible for the day-to-day running of the project and for seeing to it that it succeeded. The author worked with a National Committee comprising four other staff members namely, Professor Micere G. Mugo (Curriculum and Arts Education Department), Professor Levi M. Nyagura (Science and Mathematics Education Department), Professor Gail Jaji (Science and Mathematics Education Department) and Mr. Simon Nondo (a Senior Lecturer in the Curriculum and Arts Education Department). It was these people who adapted the international tests to the national requirements of Zimbabwe and supervised the administration of the tests in the schools.

### Financial Support for the Project

The project received all its financial support from the University of Zimbabwe's Research Board. This support was and will always remain invaluable because without it, the research would not have been carried out. In order to have an input into the formulation of the research instruments, the Coordinator managed to attend all the NRC meetings held after the initial one of 1988. The subsequent meetings were held in Washington, D.C. in June, 1989 (the first one where Zimbabwe was represented), Frascati, Italy in 1990, Copenhagen, Denmark in 1991 and the final meeting in Madrid, Spain in October, 1992. When one realises

that initially there were up to 40 countries which accepted the invitation to participate in the Study, but that only 31 countries eventually made it to the end; and that in Africa only Botswana and Zimbabwe succeeded in participating to the very end, then one understands the Zimbabwe National Committee's deep gratitude to the University of Zimbabwe's Research Board and to the IEA itself which shouldered a lot of the international meetings' expenses for the National Research Coordinators. Although Nigeria appears in the international reports as a participating country, her data remained incomplete and the NRC there never attended any of the working international meetings.

The Zimbabwe National Committee worked on a very stringent, nail-biting, shoe-string budget since the University could not afford to allocate a lot of money to one project at a time. As a result we did not deviate too much from the international format of the tests as other countries could do in order to produce tests that would best appeal to their students. All we could do was to make minimal changes such as changing some city and people's names to local ones in some literacy texts, and changing feet to metres where applicable. The lack of adequate finance had other problems which will be highlighted later elsewhere in this book.

## ZIMBABWE'S AIMS AND OBJECTIVES FOR THE STUDY

### Aims

— To define literacy for the purposes of this study.
— To describe the historical background of education in Zimbabwe as it affects this study.
— To review literature that relates to reading research in Zimbabwe.
— To spell out reasons for testing the literacy skill in the English language at the Junior Secondary School level in Zimbabwe.
— To test Form Two students in reading three types of literacy materials, which are, the narrative, expository and documents.
— To report on the results of that test discussing students' achievement levels as follows:
  - comparing and contrasting the participating schools' achievement levels within Zimbabwe;
  - comparing and contrasting Zimbabwean students' achievement levels with other students in the other 30 countries.
— To give recommendations to teachers of English and other languages in Zimbabwe, to language researchers, as well as to policy makers based on the results of the study.

## Objectives

Given the Zimbabwean historical background in education and the efforts made by the Government from 1980 to 1990 in promoting literacy in the primary and secondary schools, the Form Two students in 192 selected schools should be able to:

— read and answer questions on narrative passages in a given time frame and get the majority of the answers correct.
— read and answer questions on expository passages in a given time frame and get the majority of the answers correct.
— read and answer questions on documents, such as a bus timetable in a given time frame and get the majority of the answers correct.
— perform as well as students from 30 other countries in the same age-group who are taking the same tests at the same grade level.

## A DEFINITION OF LITERACY

In carrying out an international research project such as this one, there was need to define what was meant by literacy, not only for the benefit of Zimbabwean students and staff doing the research, but also for the benefit of all the countries participating in the study so that all of them could work on a similar understanding. We move on, therefore, to a definition of literacy as it affected the Zimbabwean research study population as well as the rest of the international research study population involved.

In defining *literacy* we must begin by attending to the most basic terms which are the adjectives, *literate* and *illiterate*. Proctor's *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines *literate* as "able to read and write. Well educated." The opposite of that is *illiterate*. Literacy, therefore, is defined as "the state or condition of being able to read and/or write." Venezky (1990), on the other hand, begins his definition of literate/illiterate by referring to the Latin term, *literatus*, "which for Cicero meant a learned person"; learned in terms of being able to read Latin. It is from this Latin word that the modern words literate and illiterate are derived. For the modern scholar, literacy means the skill of reading and writing. It requires procedural knowledge, that is, the ability to do something, as opposed to declarative knowledge — knowing of something (Venezky, 1990, 3-7). Literacy, like any other set of skills, has different levels that can be attained, namely, basic or minimal level, which implies the ability to read and write simple messages while allowing self-sustained development in literacy; and functional or required level implying a level of literacy sufficiently high for a person to function in a social contextual setting with a relative amount of sophistication which allows for changes over time, place and

social condition (Venezky, 1990, 11). According to the results of surveys carried out by Nafziger *et al* (1976); Kirsch and Jungeblut (1986), literacy skills were defined in terms of print demands of occupational, civic, community and personal functioning requiring four basic types of skills which consistently included reading, writing, numeracy and document processing (Venezky, 1990, 7). It is to be observed that most definitions of literacy centre on the skills mentioned above. For instance Gray (1956) defined literacy as follows:

> A person is functionally literate when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group.

Another definition of the 1950s describes literacy as a level of political development and posits that the higher one's education the more likely one is to believe in democratic values. By the1970s the definition of literacy had expanded to perceiving a literate person as "one who has acquired the essential knowledge and skills in reading, writing and computation, required for effective functioning in society, and whose attainment in such skills makes it possible for him to develop new aptitudes and to participate actively in the life of his times."

This definition comes closest to Venezky's of functional or required literacy which takes into consideration the need for versatility in the face of anticipated socio-political change as time goes on. Contemporary definitions accept these sociological aspects of literacy (Guthrie and Kirsch, 1977-1978; Levine, 1986; Stubbs, 1980; and Scribner, 1984). The current definition does not allow literacy to be seen as a solitary or static function, but defines it (as expressed in reading) as an interactive process. So that in reading a selection, we must understand that there is a contract with the writer and the expectations of those in the community with whom the selection will be discussed.

The IEA Reading Literacy Steering Committee grappled with this problem of defining literacy in such a way as to include thousands of students in many countries, speaking a multiplicity of languages and operating in various cultural traditions (Elley, Schleicher and Wagemaker, 1994, 5).

The Steering Committee found out that "the notion of functional literacy, with its connotations on being able to use one's literacy skill to function effectively within one's own society", was popular with National Research Coordinators (NRCs) of different countries participating in the research study. So the Committee proposed this definition which was subsequently accepted by the NRCs:

> Reading literacy is the ability to understand and use those written language forms that are required by society and/or valued by the individual (Elley *et al*, 5).

This internationally agreed definition of literacy for this project is consistent with how Zimbabweans would define literacy in their own context. Given the colonial and neo-colonial background of Zimbabwe's educational history, the definition of literacy would be incomplete without the dimension that literacy should liberate the individual and the collective group from ignorance promoted by marginalisation from the world of active participation in development (see also Mikulecky, 1990 on this point).

Literacy in Zimbabwe should enable the individual and collective group to function with ease and understanding within the national environment, using the language of one's choice to communicate through reading, writing and speaking. At the international level, the individual or collective group should be able to communicate fluently, using at least one language in currency — in Zimbabwe's case, English. In all these, literacy should prepare every individual to be a participant in the history of human development. Because literacy is attained through formal education, the United Nations, through its declaration of Human Rights, has legislated education as a right, not a privilege, for every individual since it is an essential element for social change.

It is with these considerations in mind that the University of Zimbabwe's Curriculum and Arts Education Department in the Faculty of Education saw it fit to join other countries of the world in researching in reading literacy between 1988 and 1992 at the Junior Certificate level. In order to put this study in its proper context, we will discuss the historical background to Zimbabwean education before and after independence.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO ZIMBABWEAN EDUCATION AS IT AFFECTS LITERACY

### Pre-independence African Education

Zimbabwe is a young nation which showed tremendous commitment to mass education and literacy soon after its independence in 1980. Historically, conditions governing African and European (including Coloured and Asian) education were different. For Europeans, educational opportunity was abundant while for Africans it was not. While for European children education was compulsory, for the Africans it was not and so Africans went through life with very little or no education at all (Parker, 1961). For those African children who managed to go to school, a number of bottlenecks were created for them at primary, secondary and

tertiary schools. For example, Moyana (1969) traces "the fortunes of the Grade One class of 1952" to show how many children were dropped out of the education system by the time that class reached university education level as follows:

> Of the 84 444 children who entered Grade 1, only 10 921 reached the last grade of the primary education segment and of those 1 919 went to secondary school; of those pupils only 386 reached 'O' level and only 56 reached the pre-University Upper-Sixth Form. On the other hand, more than half the European population had 10-11 years of education and a third had even more (p. 44).

We can definitely and correctly assume that not all the 56 African students who made it to Upper Sixth form managed to gain entrance to the university. For, although theoretically the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland provided education "for men and women of all races", practically, a negligible number of African students ever ended up there. In 1959, for instance, the University College enrolled a total of 188 students out of whom 154 were whites, 32 were Africans, one was Coloured (that is of mixed race) and one Asian (Parker, 289).

The effects of such a segregatory education system on the excluded African people was a low level of literacy and numeracy which in turn adversely affected their lives in various ways. Even the administration of African education was carried out in a haphazard manner as compared to European education. The Kerr Commission (1963) reported:

> The supervision of African education had originally fallen within the scope of the Colony's single Education Department, charged as it was principally with the oversight of European schools. Under the Native Development Act of 1929, following an administrative reshuffle two years earlier, the African schools passed to the Department of Native Development. Four years later they became the responsibility of the Department of Native Affairs under the indirect supervision of the Chief Native Commissioner. The Kerr Commission thus found the schools, not under a Minister of Education, but mixed up with agriculture and engineering, native labour and community development (p. 8).

Only much later in 1959 following earlier recommendations, was the Unified Teachers' Service (UTS) established by the Native Education Act which theoretically created

> equal service, a disciplinary code for professional behaviour (by statutory regulations), and ability to transfer without prejudice from one system to the other (Kerr Commission, 8).

In reality, however, UTS staff did not enjoy the same privileges as public servants who were the majority of Europeans. For instance, their leave

conditions were different, they were not awarded any end-of-year bonus and they were given lower salaries. In any case there was nothing "unifying" about the UTS since it only pertained to one racial group of teachers.

These poor educational conditions for the majority of people in the then Rhodesia persisted right up to independence in 1980. As years went by, more and more people failed to get opportunities to improve themselves educationally, so that even their quality of life was poor as it was affected by their poor education and hence, poor chances of advancement at the work places; advancement which would also determine salary and wage scales. The purpose of this deliberate educational genocide on the Africans was to ensure that they remained ignorant, obedient and subservient to the European master in all spheres. Literacy and knowledge were regarded as an expensive privilege not to be shared by all citizens alike.

## Independence and Education

The new government of 1980 was aware that,

> the previous government thrived on the ignorance of the [African] majority who were not to know much about their environment let alone their rights and innate capacity to determine their destiny (Mujuru, 1982, 2).

Unlike the previous government, the 1980 government viewed literacy as a political right, governed in the political arena; literacy as a right, and not a privilege of every person in society. Indeed, literacy has always been inextricably intertwined with social contexts that its decisions almost inevitably become political. As Goody and Watt (1968) correctly argue,

> choices about who reads, what they read, and how they use what they read always have been connected to the distribution of power in a society.

Hunter and Herman (1979) add that

> the literate majority, secure in its position of dominance, partially attributes its success to literacy and guards the entrance into literate domains.

Stucker (1991) corroborates this idea when she says,

> Literacy itself can be understood only in its social and political context, and that context, once the mythology has been stripped away, can be seen as one of entrenched class structure in which those who have power have a vested interest in keeping it.

For the Black Zimbabweans, it was the White minority which guarded the entrance to literacy jealously, which had power and a vested interest in

keeping it and which barred the opportunities for the African majority to enter and enjoy the privileges that came with literacy.

Therefore, faced with an estimated number of over 2,5 million adults who were illiterate, action was sanctioned by Government on two fronts as follows:

a) The government mounted the Adult Literacy campaign immediately to deal with illiteracy at that level urgently.
b) To avoid the continued mass production of future illiterate adults, the government declared that all children regardless of age, colour or creed should be allowed to go to primary school free of charge, and, rather than make the Grade Seven and Form Two or the junior secondary school examinations terminal, they became open to allow children to automatically benefit from four full years of secondary education up to Form Four (see the 1987 Education Act). However, free primary education for those who can afford to pay fees was discontinued after 1991, when the emergency situation prevailing in 1980 had been addressed to a large extent (see the Education Amendment Act, 1991).

These were naturally very costly decisions; costly because the previous government had run an economy which favoured less than a million people while the 1980 Zimbabwe government had to use the same economic base to suddenly cater for everybody, over seven million people at the time. But they felt that education was worth all the financial and human resources spent on it since it was an investment for the future. Up to 1995, the education budget continued to be the highest allocation that the government gave to any ministry, and perhaps this trend will continue for many years to come.

## Production of Literacy Materials

With such a great deal of sudden expansion, it followed that reading materials had to be produced at a cheaper and faster rate than book publishers could cope with. Consequently, the Ministry of Education's Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) embarked on a project to produce reading materials for primary and junior secondary school levels with the help of the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA), which agreed to fund it. These two educational levels were targeted especially because they form the base in literacy training. Once children acquire the reading skill at the primary and junior secondary school levels, they are well equipped to deal with more demanding reading required at the high school and tertiary school levels. Thus, books, poetry anthologies and plays were produced under the chief authorship of Professor Micere Githae

Mugo, a renowned scholar, author and teacher, and were distributed to schools countrywide (Chimbwanda, 1989).

On the human resources level, a new system of teacher training for primary schools was introduced under the Zimbabwe Integrated National Teacher Education Course (ZINTEC) where students stayed in College for 16 weeks while receiving a crash course in educational methods and other basics. They then went to teach as full time teachers in primary schools all over the country with their lecturers following them up giving tutorials and supervising how they read and taught. Students also wrote assignments that were marked by the lecturers. This distance education lasted for four years at the end of which students came back to College for the last 16 weeks to complete educational theory work and to write final examinations. They were then certified as qualified teachers if they succeeded in all their work.

The conventional primary and secondary school training colleges also adopted a modified system where students now trained for four years instead of the usual three, with the first year spent in College learning educational basics; the second year spent in the field, teaching as full time teachers on full salaries, but also on distance education reading and writing assignments; the third year spent back at College to complete educational theory; and the fourth year spent in the schools continuing with distance education and teaching. These teachers were also fully certified on passing all their work. This kind of teacher training was necessary in order to cope with the massive expansion that took place at the primary and secondary school levels where many schools were built to cope with the population whose educational needs had to be catered for.

In order to ensure that the educational expansion in Zimbabwe was matched by satisfactory literacy achievement, educationists embarked on research at different levels of the school system, pointing out shortfalls where discovered and experimenting with different reading methods to see which worked best. Although research was being done in the early 1980s and even before, a lot still had to be done and especially the type of research that focused on the target groups affected by the new expansion. Merely spending money on human and material resources does not guarantee success in terms of getting the desired literacy and other scholastic achievements by the student. It is in this research context that this project was undertaken. We felt that there was need for research that encompassed a representative sample of all the schools in the country and that focused specifically on the literacy skill.

Another important question to be addressed by the end of the decade of the 1980s was whether there is a link between education and development in a country. We will discuss these two issues in more detail below.

## THE NEED FOR READING LITERACY RESEARCH IN ZIMBABWE AT VARIOUS LEVELS

As we have said above, the Curriculum Development Unit in the Ministry of Education concentrated on materials production and distribution to the different urban and rural primary and junior secondary schools. There was a need to determine whether these expensively produced materials had their desired effect of raising the literacy levels of their target student population. By 1990, Zimbabwe got to a point where desired, though not exhaustive expansion, had been achieved, and where she had increased the quantity of her enrolment at every level of the formal educational system with equal output to the job market or to the self-help world of co-operatives. She needed now to assess the quality of her products. As former Minister of Education, Fay Chung (1998) once stated, Zimbabwe needed now to stop building new schools in order to consolidate the quality of the ones she had built.

We at the University of Zimbabwe in the Faculty of Education thought that this assessment or evaluation exercise could be done through the kind of research which was being proposed by the IEA and which we, therefore, agreed to undertake between 1989 and 1992. However, the IEA Reading Literacy Study was to be done at Form Two level only here in Zimbabwe. Yet many other educational levels in the country still cry out for research attention. For example, there is the Adult Literacy programme that we said was also put in place in 1980 alongside the expansion of the formal education sector. In order to support this adult literacy programme, many literacy materials in mother tongues of Shona and Ndebele were produced for the students who were both in the urban and rural areas. Ten years after the introduction of this programme, we wanted to find out if any evaluation of its effectiveness had been done; whether the new literates sustain their reading literacy and how they do it. For as Mupawaenda (1992, 106) states,

> If literacy is to be effective and lasting, it needs to be supported by an infrastructure that provides the literates with adequate reading materials capable of sustaining a literate environment in the long term.

What kind of sustaining literacy environment did these people have? The answer we received was that those questions had not yet been posed as directly and as formally as that because up till that time in 1989 when

we were asking the questions, more emphasis was being directed towards the learners themselves (Mazingi, 1989). Thus, this is one educational level where research needs to be carried out so that the above points and more can be addressed.

The other educational areas which need to be researched on are the different levels of the formal educational sector up to tertiary levels. For we cannot assume that students are as functionally literate as they should be at the end of fours years of secondary education. As Wagner points out (1983), we may assume that all our school-going children are literate simply because literacy is often "inferred from school attendance: those four years of formal public schooling are assumed to be literate," which is not always correct. Elley and others (1994, 1) also observed that,

> even in the developed world, large numbers of students pass through the school system unable or unwilling to read and write, while teachers and researchers continue to debate the reasons.

The tertiary level is one other educational level needing research to see if students are as competent in their literacy as they should be. At the University of Zimbabwe, for example, it has been found that some students are still struggling with literacy problems. Take for instance a letter written by a Graduate Certificate in Education (GradCE) student teaching English in a Harare school in 1989:

> I am Miss . . . teaching at the above mentioned school I was teaching English for the first four weeks, so I started in the fifth week. May I be permitted to write my assignment commencing on the week I started teaching I once wrote a letter but I received a letter. So I can do the assignments for February and March (lesson plans). NB. The co-ordinator advised me to do my assignments from the day I started teaching English.

The above letter fails to communicate the student's problem or request, besides its punctuation errors. If one teaches the GradCE students, then one may be able to guess the actual message and request of the letter, based on what other students have experienced in the past. The fact here is that this graduate English teacher has not been able to communicate, and we need to find out where the problem really lies, especially that this teacher is also responsible for teaching English as a second language to students who should be part of the literate working society of the future. So as we said, the tertiary education sector needs to be researched into from time to time to ensure that students there are as literate as they should be when they complete their studies.

## THE POSSIBLE LINK BETWEEN EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The purpose of getting an education is for people to better their lives by getting better paying jobs and by increasing production at the work place so that on the whole, a country can progress economically, socially and politically. The question that often arises, therefore, is whether there is a link between educational achievement, literacy and development.

Some researchers in the former Soviet Union in the 1890s (Anderson and Bowman, 1966), in India (1966) and elsewhere have pointed towards that link between education and productivity at work. Julius Nyerere sees the development of people, not "like building roads or wells, [because] people cannot be developed by others, they must develop themselves" through education which enhances their output in all spheres of life (see Mupawaenda, 1992, 98). In their work with industrial workers in Bombay (Mumbai), Desai and Punalekar (1971) concluded that indeed, literacy does lead to increased productivity; while Yanzhul and Chuprov researched and provided empirical data to show that "the level of productivity of labor [sic] in various countries is positively correlated with per capita expenditures on education and with rates of literacy". They believed that the reasons for economic underdevelopment in the Soviet Union at the time were linked with the limited literacy levels of her workers in industry as they argued:

> There are, of course, many factors impeding the development of the Russian economy, but the foremost among them is the general illiteracy which distinguishes our country from all other civilized countries. An increase of labor [sic] productivity is the only means to erase poverty in Russia and the best policy to achieve it is through the spread of education and knowledge (see Anderson and Bowman, 1966, 5).

I. A. Vyshnegradskii, Soviet Finance Minister in the 1980s, also supported the view that education and literacy are necessary for economic production to be enhanced and increased as he stated:

> The lack of general education prevents the workers in most cases from elevating themselves to the level of consciousness and clear understanding of the operations that they perform in their work and thereby downgrades the dignity of the work performed. Our industry, regardless of all protective tariffs, is involved in a bitter struggle against foreign production in which our competitors can rely upon an element of workers with a relatively high general education and special training. Those workers considerably exceed, both in terms of the quality of their products and speed of production, the performance of the uneducated people who constitute the majority of the work force in our industrial

> plants, so that our industry has to conduct its struggle against foreign competition equipped with inferior weapons, and this of course leads to economic defects (See Kahan, 1966).

We can go on to discuss many more scholars with similar views, but the above illustrations are enough to justify our argument that there seems to be a definite link between general education, literacy and development in a country. So it is imperative that Zimbabwean students at all educational levels ensure that their literacy skills are highly developed. In order to monitor such literacy development, research is necessary at all these different educational levels.

The discussion above has attempted to show that research in education at different levels is required in Zimbabwe: at the informal adult literacy level as well as at the formal school levels — the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. As we indicated earlier, some research has been carried out at some of these levels by university lecturers and school teachers. In the following Literature Review section, we focus on such research in the field of reading literacy in Zimbabwe.

## LITERATURE REVIEW ON READING LITERACY RESEARCH IN ZIMBABWE

Having talked about the need for reading literacy research in Zimbabwe at various levels and the link between education and development, I will focus briefly on the kind of research available to date in this area.

From the mid-1970s, a reasonable amount of research has been going on with the aim of improving the teaching and learning of reading in primary and secondary schools. Besides investigative research done by individual teachers and university lecturers, Zimbabwe had a relatively active Reading Council called the Harare Reading Council (HRC) which was established in February, 1983 with a membership that included teachers, lecturers, publishers, headmasters, curriculum developers and other Ministry of Education officials. The activities of the Council centred on ways and means of improving reading instruction in the schools, and workshops were held each year at which reading specialists and researchers discussed the latest methods in the teaching of reading.

As a feature of the post-independence period, the Harare Reading Council's formation was a useful move which was spearheaded by the Associate College Centre (now called the Department of Teacher Education, DTE) at the University of Zimbabwe. To complement activities in the HRC, the DTE published and still does publish, a journal entitled, *The Bulletin of the Department of Teacher Education* (formerly known as *The Bulletin of the*

*Associate College Center*). Many articles were published here which all had a bearing on how to improve instruction in different subjects at the school level. Of particular interest to us are the articles on reading literacy research which go back to the 1970s before Zimbabwe's independence. We will discuss these articles below.

Sheila Duncan (1978) published an article entitled, "more on reading improvement", in which she reports on a survey that she and her colleague in the English Department of Lower Gweru Teachers' College carried out with first year teacher training students during the second term of 1977. Duncan and her colleague, Solomon Matema, "made a survey of the basic untrained speeds of pupils from Grade Three through Seven in three different schools in [their] area". This study basically tested the reading speed and comprehension of children in primary school and it was discovered that the children who read fastest had the most comprehension of the text. These results have a bearing on our 1989-1992 IEA Reading Literacy Study in that a lot of students failed to finish the test items. Did reading speed influence achievement in any way? Secondly, was non-completion of the test instruments a result of slow speed in reading or difficulty of the items? These questions will hopefully be explored outside the scope of this report.

David Stern (1981) described a situation where African orature can play a vital role in the teaching of reading and other skills such as writing, discussion or argument, listening, and so on. He described this approach in his article, "Catching language on the horns of a dilemma", and concluded that a story can be fully utilised to train different skills in children which are related to reading. Although Stern's ESL class was made up of adult students who came from South and Central America, the Far East and the Soviet Union studying in the USA, the situation described is applicable to Zimbabwe because students here study English as a second language and often have to struggle with reading, speaking and writing that language correctly. This question of the second language as the language of the IEA test will be addressed later in this book. The article therefore is relevant to our research.

Joyce Childs (1981) investigated "Factors associated with children who have problems in learning to read", and found that generally literature concerning such factors related to backwardness in reading can be grouped "broadly under three headings: the pupil, the home, the school". This is a pertinent point so far as it relates to the IEA Reading Literacy Study because those are the factors we dealt with and investigated at length.

Dr. Childs and other researchers and school teachers published several articles in *The Bulletin* which focus on reading in the primary schools of Zimbabwe such as "The development and evaluation of a Shona kid" (1984); "The teaching of reading: What is going on in teachers' colleges?" (1985); "On being a creative teacher of reading" (1986); "A shot in the arm" and "An account of remedial reading experiment" (1979). All these articles were written by Dr. Childs. Then there are others such as "Setting the stage for active reading and responding" (Makuyana, 1985); "Teaching reading in reading ability groups" (Roller, 1986), and many more. All these articles describe what we might call a "local" problem: lo*cal* because these are specifically limited problem areas being investigated and for which attempted answers or solutions are provided. None of the authors deals with investigations into the impact of the reading literacy status of the whole primary or secondary school level to determine whether the national reading curriculum inputs are having their desired effect.

## RESEARCH AT THE SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL

At the secondary school level, not much research has been done to date. One article by Collen Mutisi (1986) makes an "Analysis of 'O' level comprehension papers", to see how students performed in their exams that year. At the junior secondary school level Pfukwa (1994) wrote a Master's thesis on "The Role of Background Knowledge in Reading Comprehension at Form One Level". The latter study is the closest to the IEA Reading Literacy Study. Even though the research was done with only two Form One classes in a Harare low density school, it is closest to the IEA one in that it focuses on the same population group that we focused on. Pfukwa's findings indicated that

> background knowledge does play an important role in the reading process [and] can override other variables like linguistic proficiency (p.viii).

This is similar to what Moyana (March, 1991, 12) found when analysing answers to one of the items on the pilot version of the IEA test where students gave an answer based more on their background knowledge than on the facts from the passage.

Since success in secondary and tertiary schools depends very heavily, not only on the student being able to read properly at primary school level, but also on developing the skill at the junior and higher secondary school levels, more research is called for in reading at these levels and it is very wise to begin with the junior secondary level where:

> independent learning is introduced and the learner has to read more material than he did in primary school [and where] the learner has to develop comprehension skills not only for learning the English language but also for understanding the content in other subjects on the curriculum (Pfukwa, vii).

Below I discuss the IEA researchers' reasons for testing the literacy skill at the junior secondary school level.

## REASONS FOR TESTING THE LITERACY SKILL IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AT THE JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL IN ZIMBABWE

In this section I will spell out reasons why we found it mandatory to carry out research in reading literacy in the English language at the junior secondary school level, popularly known as the Junior Certificate or JC level in Zimbabwe.

Internationally the choice of research populations were two: the grades in which most nine and 14-year olds were to be found. So the reading research could be carried out at the primary school in a grade where the majority of nine-year olds are found; or in the secondary school where the majority of 14-year olds are found. The two populations were designated, Population A (or Pop. A for short), and Population B (Pop. B). The decisions on the target populations to be researched on were made by the International Steering Committee for the project whose names we have given above, and the National Research Co-odinators of the countries which attended the very first NRC meeting in October, 1988 in Washington, D.C., USA; a meeting which marked the beginning of this project. By the time Zimbabwe joined the Study in March, 1989, these two populations had already been established. The reasons for testing at these two levels were valid: the nine-year old stage was one where,

> children in most countries could cope adequately with written tests and questionnaires given under group administration [and the] teacher effects were more likely to be found at this level of the education system. The second population was at a point in the school system near the end of compulsory schooling. It was expected that this population would probably reflect the reading ability of the new generation of the majority of people in the workforce (Elley *et al*, 1994, 6-7).

Because of financial and manpower constraints, we in Zimbabwe opted to test only at the 14-year old age group and we calculated this to be at the last class of the JC or at Form Two level. So we were going to test Population B (Pop. B) only. We thought this was a very important level to evaluate

because it is a transitional stage between the primary and the senior secondary school levels where heavier reading literacy demands will be made on the student. We also opted to test in English rather than in the mother tongues because English is the official language of this country (see the 1987 Education Act). Therefore, students are required to be sufficiently competent and literate in it in order to cope with further studies among other things. We thought JC was also a good level to assess the children's literacy in English considering that this is the ninth year of studying it before students complete their basic secondary education two years later in Form Four. Any intervention could be done successfully more or less within the following two years after Form Two. We called this the Phase One of the project. Phase Two was to be the testing of Form Two students in Shona and Ndebele and Phase Three was to be the testing of the nine-year olds in English, Shona and Ndebele (See Moyana *et al*, 1990).

The importance of this level is also emphasised if we remember that in 1992, *The Herald* reported proceedings in the House of the Zimbabwean Parliament where the Cabinet is said to have

> advised the Ministry of Education to raise the standards of schools to acceptable levels before proposals can be accepted to restructure the education system to cater for academic and non-academic pupils.

The then Deputy Minister of Education "told Parliament that his Ministry was aware that not all pupils were capable of passing 'O' levels." As a remedy to this problem, the Deputy Minister and his Ministry were proposing to stream children according to ability, so that some could follow a purely academic curriculum, some an academic/technical curriculum up to 'O' level, and others a non-'O' level curriculum. The latter group would be certified by the Ministry of Education. "The selection of the proposed stream would be based on performance of children in the Zimbabwe Junior Certificate examination," the Deputy Minister suggested.

These were major shifts in the 'O' level curriculum being proposed, based on the students' cumulative ability at the 14-year old age group. Up to the time of writing this report, 1995, the above ideas had not yet been implemented. But it is possible that they may be implemented in the future and that the JC level is deemed to be the correct level for such curriculum shifts in the Zimbabwean education system. Therefore, we need to know globally what personal, home, school and cumulative educational factors are affecting the child at this level to be able to influence his/her achievement which would result in correct decisions being made about his/her educational future.

Considering that not much literacy or other reading research has been done at the JC level countrywide in Zimbabwe on which policy makers can base their criteria for any change in curriculum, we felt that this research study would make a modest beginning and an important contribution towards assisting them with the required information.

In the following chapters, we will therefore describe the research design we used to do the research including the selection of the populations to be tested. We will also discuss the students' results after writing the tests as well as student, teacher and school factors that were found to be affecting students' achievement. We will then draw our conclusions and finally, proffer our recommendations for future continued research, teacher implementation, and for possible action by policy makers of our educational system.

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